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Letter dated 14 May 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to forward herewith the letter received today, 14 May 2001, via fax, from H.E. Ali Said Abdella, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the State of Eritrea, addressed to you (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Ahmed Tahir **Baduri**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 14 May 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I am writing to express my Government's utmost indignation at the allegation of Ethiopia accusing my country of violating the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities of 18 June 2000. Ethiopia falsely claims, in its letter of 7 May 2001 (S/2001/448, annex), that "Eritrea is bringing its troops back into the Temporary Security Zone, lock, stock and barrel, including senior officers".

This accusation is not borne out by the facts on the ground. If anything, it betrays a hidden motive and a sinister agenda on the part of Ethiopia.

In one sense, the Government of Eritrea is not surprised by this wild allegation.

Back in June, when the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities was under negotiation between the two conflicting parties through the facilitation of our peace partners, Ethiopia insisted on a preposterous precondition for signing the Agreement. This was a request for a unilateral downsizing of the Eritrean Army according to the dictates of Ethiopia. Eritrea and the facilitators rightly rejected this precondition that would have compromised Eritrea's sovereignty. In the event, Ethiopia had to drop its unacceptable preconditions under duress.

Ethiopia again tried to impose a variant of this request at a meeting of the Military Coordination Committee. The Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) initially accepted the request and inserted into the agenda the issue of the size and composition of the Eritrean law enforcement organs that would have to be established in the Temporary Security Zone in accordance with the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities. At the meeting, however, there was proper recognition that Ethiopia's request was not substantiated by the provisions of the Agreement and that this would have constituted an infringement on Eritrea's sovereign rights. Consequently, it was dropped from the agenda.

In this context, Ethiopia's baseless protests now could have been easily dismissed as a hapless resuscitation of old baggage. Unfortunately, there is a much murkier dimension behind its dogged attempts at limiting or interfering with Eritrea's sovereign rights. In its illicit objectives to destabilize Eritrea, Ethiopia has brought together and is sponsoring an assortment of terrorist groups. The Ethiopian Army has provided protection to these armed gangs, as well as to Ethiopian militia and other armed infiltrators, to harass the population in the occupied areas and to loot property. These acts are documented by international humanitarian groups, which have had a presence in the occupied areas.

Ethiopia is not, indeed, making any bones about its malicious intention of pursuing these lawless acts in the Temporary Security Zone after it is established and while it is being monitored by UNMEE. The audacious public statement made by General Alemshet Digafe, who heads the Ethiopian "Bureau for Ethiopian-Eritrean Peacekeeping Coordination", is too clear to merit elaboration. In an interview with the monthly magazine of the Tigari People's Liberation Front, *Efoyta*, whose English translation was put on the Ethiopian web site recently, the General states: "UNMEE does not have any authority to interfere in the internal

matters of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Therefore, if there is any political group, armed or unarmed, moving in the Temporary Security Zone, it cannot prevent them from moving in the area. That is not within its authority. ... The Temporary Security Zone will be established within Eritrea. Eritrea will establish civil administration, police and militia in the area, but these people may be a target for the opposition parties. Therefore, when they try to attack the Eritreans, the peacekeeping force could also fall victim. Basically, I do not think the opposition will target UNMEE. I hope UNMEE will provide an answer to this problem. Therefore, it is up to UNMEE to decide on how to move its forces so that different opposition groups cannot attack them".

As far as the facts on the ground are concerned, the reality is the following:

- Eritrea has faithfully rearranged its troops, deploying them north of the 25-km Temporary Security Zone and, in many instances, much deeper inside its sovereign territory. Eritrea has fulfilled its part of the bargain rigorously even as controversy remains on the southern boundary of the Temporary Security Zone owing to Ethiopia's refusal to honour its commitments.

- Eritrea's paramount concern remains ensuring the return of the more than 250,000 of its internally displaced population to their homes and villages before the onset of the winter rains. Police and militia are part and parcel of the civilian administration that has to be established to ensure the welfare and safety of the civilian population. In this regard, Eritrea has asked the United Nations to ensure the right of return and protection of the Eritrean population to their villages in the areas still occupied by Ethiopia.

- Eritrea has no intention whatsoever to "bring back its army to the Temporary Security Zone" through a back door. It is patently clear that a couple of thousand of lightly armed Eritrean police and militias, dispersed in more than 400 villages over a total area of 25,000 km (the area of the Temporary Security Zone), cannot pose a legitimate cause of concern to Ethiopia, which has close to a quarter of a million of its heavily armed troops deployed on or along the border.

- It must also be borne in mind that Eritrea has already signed with UNMEE a Protocol that governs the operational modalities of the law enforcement organs (police and militia) to ensure smooth coordination. Among other things, "movement of 20 or more militia persons in groups outside their duty area shall occur within the Temporary Security Zone with prior notification to the nearest peacekeeping headquarters".

Ethiopia has therefore no case. As underlined above, its accusation is baseless and prompted by ulterior motives.

Violations of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities and impediment to the peace process in fact continue to be perpetrated by Ethiopia. Among other things:

1. Ethiopia continues to refuse to redeploy its troops from certain areas in the Temporary Security Zone. The Government of Eritrea has today received disturbing information of new military camps set up in the central part of the Temporary Security Zone by Ethiopia;

2. Ethiopia continues to refuse to provide UNMEE with information on landmines that it has planted. This will not only impede the return of the internally displaced persons but also jeopardize innocent lives;

3. Ethiopia continues to impede agreement on high-altitude flights by refusing to allow the most direct route, as originally proposed by UNMEE.

If Ethiopia's transparent tactics are to cry foul first so as to avoid accountability, this surely cannot be swallowed by the international community.

(*Signed*) Ali Said **Abdella**
Minister